

IECSS Inclusive Beginnings Podcast, Episode 3 (Inclusive Beginnings: An Inclusive Future for All) transcript

Date of Transcription: March 15, 2023

Length of Podcast: 17 minutes and 58 seconds

Speakers:

Kevin McShan (Host, Let's Have this Conversation)

Marion Trent-Kratz (Senior Research Advisor, Children and Community Services Division, City of Hamilton)

Shelley Spain (City of Hamilton)

Alex Madjeric (Acting Manager of Special Needs Resourcing and Quality Initiatives, City of Hamilton)

Sue Lepore (Registered Early Childhood Educator, ASCY)

Ruth Doherty (Executive Director, ASCY)

Karen Pavao (Senior Manager, Children's Services, Community Living Hamilton)

Kevin McShan: Placing children at the centre of both opportunity, advancement, and inclusion, spearheaded the reason why the City of Hamilton and some prominent community partners wanted to be involved in the IECSS project and in this episode of Inclusive Beginnings, we'll take a deeper dive into how all of these parties are interconnected to serve the best interests of some deserving kids. We began our conversation by the group emphasising one consistent and fundamental perspective as to why they're all involved. All of them are interested in putting the child at the centre of everything they do. Including their association with this project. So, I want to wish you all a very good morning and I want to thank all of you for your participation in this latest episode of Inclusive Beginnings and I'm very delighted to be with all of you to find out how important this particular project is to all of you and why you're involved. So, with that I welcome you all to the program and it's a pleasure to see all of you this morning.

Everyone: Thank you, Kevin.

Kevin McShan: Yes, absolutely and I'm thrilled to be here myself and I'm going to start our conversation just with a general question allowing all of you to tell me your connection to this project and why it's important to you.

Alex Madjeric: Thank you, Kevin. So, it's Alex Madjeric. My involvement with the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System study, associated with the City's support of the project and my partnership as acting manager of the Special Needs Resourcing and

Quality Initiatives. The project has provided extensive knowledge and opportunities to learn in the Hamilton Early Years community.

Sue Lepore: So, if I can just in. I'm Sue Lepore from ASCY and I just wanted to say that my involvement with this project dates right back to the very beginning. At that time, I was a Program Manager for an inclusive preschool support program in the City of Hamilton. So, we worked in preschool settings all throughout our community and we thought it was really important to learn about this study and because our program was parent driven and had the child at the centre of it all really, we encouraged our families to participate in the project really as a way of having their voices heard about their lived experiences of living and navigating the system of accessing supports for their child and their family.

Ruth Doherty: Yeah, and I can go. Like Sue Lepore I work for Affiliated Services for Children and Youth, we call it ASCY. My involvement dates way back to when the project started as well. At that time I was the Director of Child and Family Services and I managed the Hamilton Preschool Speech and Language program, as well as the Central South, which is a regional program, infant hearing, and blind low-vision early intervention programs. With these programs we touched over 6000 children and their families annually and I think what really strikes me looking back is how much the initial findings of the study confirmed how our programs were very central referral sources for many professionals who work with children and their families.

Karen Pavao: I'm Karen Pavao. I'm Senior Manager for Children's Services with Community Living Hamilton and I actually have also been around since the inception of the program. I was at the same program that Sue mentioned many years ago so, that's how I am connected. From there currently with Community Living Hamilton our Resource Consultants at least on an annual basis help to recruit families for the project. So, they either are speaking to families or they're distributing some of the flyers either electronically or the paper copies.

Shelley Spain: I will go next. My name is Shelley Spain and I work for the City of Hamilton so, my connection to the study began in my previous roles first, as a classroom teacher similar to what Karen was saying handing out flyers, encouraging families to participate and then as the Supervisor of the City of Hamilton's only directly operated childcare centre. So, I'm fairly new in my current role as the Acting Supervisor of Special Needs Resourcing and Quality for the Early Years community in Hamilton so, I'm really looking forward to continuing that connection in this new capacity.

Marion Trent-Kratz: Yeah, and I'm Marion Trent-Kratz. I work alongside all of these wonderful individuals who are really overseeing implementation of services in the City of Hamilton and managing that. So, I am Marion Trent-Kratz. I am the Senior Research Advisor for the City of Hamilton's Children and Community Services Division within the Healthy and Safe Communities Department. I was part of the very beginnings of the project during the CIHR planning grant that extended into what now is such a mutually

beneficial partnership with the City of Hamilton. My current role on the project is as a collaborator for the latest iteration of the project and it was important for capacity building to build knowledge based on children and families and that would inform policy going forward in the City of Hamilton.

Kevin McShan: Fabulous and um, I believe Alex you have the next question. I'm curious to know why did your organization decide to be part of this partnership specifically.

Alex Madjeric: Great question, Kevin. The City of Hamilton has an extensive, trusting, and beneficial relationship with the project director, Dr. Underwood since 2008, 2009 on various projects that provided the future opportunity to participate in cross community based research partnerships and collaborations to inform local inclusion planning, decisions, and policy. The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System study focuses on community-based knowledge building and the transfer has had a tremendous impact on how the City of Hamilton and the early years system of services and professionals understand, plan, and implement inclusive services and programs as well as develop policy. So, from the beginning and across the multiple phases of the project the element of that study that remain in Hamilton's partnership commitment are providing Hamilton's families and children and youth with disabilities a voice in the research to share their experiences with services and programs and alignment. Alignment and involving knowledge transferred to inform our work on building a high-quality, equitable, diverse, and inclusive services system for families and children and youth that addresses barriers and is culturally responsive.

Kevin McShan: Absolutely and Sue, the next question goes to you. I'm curious to know how is your participation in this particular project been influential to you and your organization and the community?

Sue Lepore: Great. Another great question. So, thank you. So, here currently at ASCY, which is Affiliated Services for Children and Youth in Hamilton, we work really hard to really work with our educators-our early childhood educators and licensed childcare programs here in Hamilton and so true to our pedagogy and *How does Learning Happen?* We rethink and we recommit ourselves to looking at children through a holistic lens and that we recognize that children really are at the centre of all learning. Having a special need is looked upon as having a gift versus a deficit. So, at ASCY our mission in supporting early childhood educators we help them to create inclusive and diverse learning environments and that really respond well to the individual capabilities of children. We work on removing barriers allowing children and families to feel welcomed. We support educators to reflect on their practice and to be intentional in their plan when they're coming up with setting up their learning environment, making sure that it's always developmentally sound. We also encourage inviting parents to participate and to contribute in the child's learning process and that's for all kids. At ASCY also we co lead various communities of practice and they highlight ways that leaders and educators can come together and talk about ways of supporting inclusion through the development of

policy and through community relationships and partnerships and collaboration with all of our colleagues in the City of Hamilton.

Kevin McShan: Well, I thank you for sharing that information. Ruth, the next question goes to you. I'm curious to know from your perspective what is the strength of this specific project?

Ruth Doherty: Thanks, Kevin. For me, the study really confirms the difficulties that families have in navigating a system that is so complex in order to get the supports they need. In terms of my work, back as the Director, it really reinforced and continues to reinforce the decision we make to situate services such as our universal infant hearing screen in places where families and children frequently visit. So, one example is the EarlyONs and they have been a fantastic collaborative partner. Having families come to the locations such as the EarlyON where we do our universal hearing screen we feel that we act as a feeder to connections and services and the staff there who have a rich knowledge of other services that may be of interest to families. I also believe that our involvement in the study has deepened our understanding of the system of service and the need for clear pathways. It is reinforced how important it is for our staff to know the community and the services available to support appropriate referrals to meet the needs of children and their families. Finally, I just see it as really part of the Hamilton strengths, which is really around partnerships and working together to look at continuous ways to improve services for children and their families.

Kevin McShan: Ruth, I thank you for that authentic sharing and now actually I would probably go to you with this next question. What do you hope to get out of the project specifically moving forward?

Shelley Spain: Thank you, Kevin. As we all know, Dr. Underwood is highly regarded and respected not only here in Ontario but across the country so, Hamilton as a community we have learned a tremendous amount from her and our hope is to continue that partnership and promote her work and the emphasis on inclusion. Hamilton is actually seen as a leader and at the forefront of that work and we see this as a great opportunity and a great way to strengthen the wonderful work that we do with Community Living Hamilton, with ASCY, and with Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre.

Kevin McShan: Thank you, Shelley and Marion the next question is intended for you and I want to know how did you hope this project helps to inform policy moving forward from a government decision-making process going forward?

Marion: Yeah, thank you for that question, Kevin. It's really imperative that the project continues to evolve and refine what it means to provide sustained and resource and inclusive service system that needs and meets the needs of families and children or youth related to diversity. Hopefully, the project will continue to seek opportunities to engage and leverage policy advocates and allies that it has in the past and going forward that understand how inclusive service systems happen when policies are developed from the voices of families and children or youth to meet the needs of their

lived experiences and their unique or intersecting identities as well as continue to seek opportunities to share knowledge from the project to inform local policy and decision-making at a community level while also engaging advocacy groups and associations such as the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association or Inclusion Canada-some recent examples. Just to continue the conversation toward developing policy and given the national and international partners interests related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Disabled Persons and the recent funding of the Canada Wide Early Learning and Childcare, it will be really interesting to see and sit back and see how the project leverages opportunities to inform federal government decision-making moving forward, in addition to the provincial policy.

Kevin McShan: Karen, my final question this morning goes to you and I'm curious to know how do you think you'd define an inclusive future for all children across the province and throughout this project as well?

Karen Pavao: Okay that's a *really* big question, Kevin. So, although I am honoured to answer the question just saying it does make it sound easier than it actually is. I mean ideally all children would be seen as innately valuable from the moment they interact with the various systems that they belong to. So that in fact the able-bodied really isn't the standard and that disability is really only visible to keep our resources flowing to those who require them. So, barriers would become minimalized compared to maybe what we see now and we would be removing that difficult navigation that families do have as they move through systems and that they don't have to choose safety over inclusion. That they're really- our educators out there are feeling confident and empowered to provide those inclusive services. I think you know what-what's most important we've learned that research matters and so, we need to continue to ask this question to keep it on top of mind because a year from now, two years from now there will be a different answer and that's a good thing. So, we need to ensure that our children with disabilities are not forgotten in our discussions and in our interactions with various systems.

Kevin McShan: Well, I really want to take this opportunity to thank all of you for taking some time to share your knowledge, expertise, and passion for this particular and important project and I want to thank all of you for joining me this morning to engage in conversation, it's most appreciated.

Everyone: Thank you so much, Kevin. Thank you.

Marion Trent-Kratz: Yeah, it was wonderful.

Kevin McShan: In future episodes of Inclusive Beginnings, we'll take a closer look and a deeper dive into the critical role that Indigenous families have played in this project and continue to answer the question how do we truly define an inclusive future for all children? I'm Kevin McShan and I'll see you next time.

END: 17:58